



Highland Lakes Steward

January 2016

Volume 7, Issue 1

MISSION

The Texas Master Naturalist program is a natural resource-based volunteer training and development program sponsored statewide by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The mission of the program is to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers who provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the state of Texas

OFFICERS

President
Melissa Duckworth
lissaduckworth@gmail.com
(512) 922-1518

Cathy Hill
cmhill1957@yahoo.com
(512) 793-5588

Secretary
Marilyn McClain
mccgrammy@yahoo.com
(214) 235-5759

Treasurer
Susan Downey
shdowney@gmail.com
(830) 693-9291

MESSAGE FROM MELISSA

by Mellissa Duckworth

I have sent this photo (minus that of the hound) to several of my Master Naturalist friends. Time to share it with the rest. This "catch" of Western diamondback rattlesnakes by our recurrent snake handler was a record on our property. Seventeen..... In one hour. Ten slithered from one cavernous hole and seven from another. I became yellow bellied when I was beckoned to come see the box of rattling hissers. They were in a bola which is a mass of writhing entwined snakes resembling a ball. A bola is something to behold~ unlike a bolo, which is a skinny man's tie that looks like a black chicken snake wrapped around the neck. Anyway, I have been struck on the leg with snake guards on, sidestepped the serpents countless times, and nursed my poor hounds from the brink of eternal doom after being bitten. I still remain transfixed and fascinated by rattlesnakes



Live catch of the day

My primary message is to literally watch your step this time of year. According to our erstwhile snake handling honcho, March is prime mating season. They are hungry, warming up and more than a bit hostile. Hikers and trail busters beware.

I felt very small pings of sympathy mixed with fear gazing from a safe distance into the snake box. I realize they can be lethal to me or my loved ones. Extra vigilance is a must and I feel some relief after thinning out the population a bit. The batch would take up residence in a laboratory in San Antonio, living on pinkies and being milked once a week. Not a horrible life for a snake. Like our prisoners being fed three squares a day I suppose.



"Don't let this happen to you."

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Please submit pictures, articles, reports, stories, announcements, etc. to

chili865@gmail.com.

Photos should have captions and appropriate credits. The deadline for submissions to each month's newsletter is the 10th of the month and publication will be by the 15th.

FEBRUARY PROGRAM

By Mike Childers

No matter how much you knew about feral hogs, at our February meeting you learned a lot more from Josh Helcel from the Agrilife Extension Service. He is an expert on feral hogs and a very entertaining speaker.



MESSAGE FROM MELISSA

(Continued from page 1)

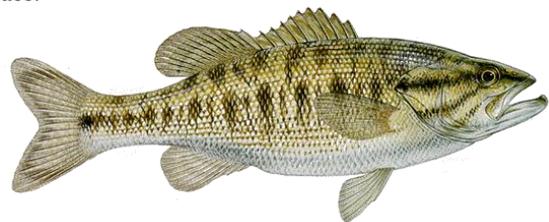
Other than the production of vaccines for dogs and antivenin for humans who get bitten, what other possible benefits might the venom hold? Might it treat or cure cancer? Research is underway at this time. Snake venom causes the cells that line blood vessels to separate and die including the kinds that feed cancerous tumors. Stands to reason we might not want to wipe out what might be a salvation someday. Besides, they were here first. I can be afraid and still have squatters rights I think.

J. Frank Dobie wrote a book with the predictable title "Rattlesnakes". It is full of fact and folklore and is an excellent read. Dobie writes, "I am good at belonging to minorities and I have joined this one. I have killed hundreds of rattlesnakes. The next one I meet I think I shall tell him how much I appreciate him. There are legions of morons driving around in automobiles more dangerous and less interesting. Why should I pick on a rattlesnake?" I do not recommend you introduce yourself and say "howdy do" should you have an encounter. On the the contrary, I suggest you walk away.... post-haste....then check out J. Frank Dobie's book and prepare to be highly entertained and somewhat mortified.

MARCH PROGRAM

By Cathy Hill

Our Speaker for March 2 will be Preston Bean, PhD, a Conservation Ecologist with TPWD at the Heart of the Hills Fisheries Science Center. He will be speaking on the restoration of our state fish, the Guadalupe Bass.



Stewardship

An ethic that embodies cooperative planning and management of environmental resources with organizations, communities and others to actively engage in the prevention of loss of habitat and facilitate its recovery in the interest of long-term sustainability

THE “FISH HAWK” - A.K.A. THE OSPREY

by Joanne Fischer



The Osprey (Order: Accipitriformes, Family: Pandionidae) is one of the most widespread birds of prey and can be found on every continent except Antarctica. However, it is unique among raptors in that its primary dietary staple (99 percent of its diet) is live fish. And therefore, it possesses specialized physical characteristics and exhibits unique behavior to assist in hunting and catching its prey. This is another species that winters in parts of Texas (including the Hill Country) and points further south (Central and South America). But it breeds in the northern United States, along the seacoasts and in Canada.

The Osprey has been described as a large and “lanky” raptor. Its body is slender and its wings are long and bent in a kink (an “M” shape when seen from below) while in flight. Ospreys are brown above and are the only large raptor with an extensive, unmarked white belly. From below, the wings are mostly white with a prominent dark patch at the wrists. The head is white with a distinctive bold black stripe through the eye. They have a sharply hooked black bill and yellow eyes. The sexes appear fairly

similar, but the adult male can be distinguished from the female by its slimmer body and narrower wings (which means you have to see two together to determine this!).

The Osprey will be spotted near almost any body of water that has an abundant supply of fish including lakes, rivers, reservoirs and even salt marshes and ponds. Unable to dive to more than about three feet below the water's surface, Ospreys gravitate toward shallow fishing grounds, frequenting deep water only where fish school near the surface. On only very rare occasions, Ospreys have been observed feeding on fish carcasses or on birds, snakes, voles, squirrels, muskrats, and salamanders.

What I didn't know: The Osprey is different from other raptors because it has a “reversible” outer toe that allows it to grasp with two toes in front and two behind (owls also have this physical characteristic). They also have barbed pads on the soles of their feet that enable them to grip slippery fish. Ospreys have

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FISH HAWK

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vision that is well adapted to detecting underwater objects from the air and they have closeable nostrils to keep out water during dives. They often hover briefly before diving feet first to grab a fish. And they are reported to be “excellent anglers”. Several studies demonstrated that Ospreys caught fish on at least one out of every four dives and would snare a fish in 12 minutes or less of “fishing time”. And finally, when flying with a “catch”, Ospreys are known to orient the fish headfirst for less wind resistance.

Ospreys reach sexual maturity and begin breeding around the age of three to four years. They nest in a wide variety of locations as long as there is an adequate supply of accessible fish nearby (within miles). Ospreys require nest sites in open surroundings for easy approach, with a wide, sturdy base and safety from ground predators (such as raccoons). Nests are usually built on snags, treetops, or crotches between large branches and trunks. The Osprey will readily build its nest on man made structures, such as telephone poles, channel markers, duck blinds, and specially designed nest platforms. Such platforms have become an important tool in reestablishing Osprey populations in areas where they had disappeared. Osprey nests are built of sticks and lined with bark, sod, grasses, vines, and algae. Nest construction is a joint effort of both sexes with the male fetching most of the nesting material and the female arranging it.

They have one brood per year consisting of one to four eggs. The incubation period is a little over a month and the young do not fledge for eight to ten weeks after hatching. Another fact I learned is that Osprey eggs do not hatch all at once. Instead they hatch over almost a week's period of time. If food is abundant, there are rarely problems associated with this staggered hatching. However if food is scarce, the older hatchling(s) may dominate and monopolize food brought by the parents and the younger chicks may starve to death. In North America, Great Horned Owls, Golden Eagles, and Bald Eagles are the major predators of Ospreys, capable of taking both nestlings and adults. Raccoons can be a serious threat



to nestlings or eggs if they can access the nest.

Although North American Osprey populations became endangered in the 1950s, when pesticides poisoned the birds and thinned their eggshells, they have become a conservation success story. After the 1972 U.S. ban on DDT, populations rebounded and have been growing by about 2.5 percent per year between 1966 and 2010, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey and are therefore now listed as of Least Concern from a conservation standpoint. In addition to the ban on pesticides, construction of artificial nest sites helped halt the decline of the species. But Ospreys are still listed as endangered or threatened in some states—especially inland, where pesticides decimated many populations. Another thing I learned is that, unfortunately, a growing cause of death for Ospreys is entanglement at the nest: the adults incorporate baling twine and other discarded fishing lines into their nests which can end up wrapped around a chick's feet and injure it or keep it from leaving the nest.

Look for wintering Osprey around any well-stocked body of water in the area. They are especially prevalent in south Texas along the coast. Their “fishing” performance is an awesome sight to behold.

And in conclusion: the Osprey is often referred to as the “fish eagle, the sea hawk, the river hawk or the fish hawk”! I can't imagine why.

BALD EAGLES AND MORE

by Lori Greco

I went to the Black Water Refuge in Cambridge, MD and captured some interesting photos.



Delmarva Fox Squirrel now off the endangered list



There is a story about this pair of Bald eagles. Last year, they were probably first year parents and allowed their hatchling to freeze to death and then vacated the nest before the other egg hatched. Biologists think the egg was not viable. You can watch them this year on the BlackWater National Refuge on Eagle cam. Maybe this year will prove they are ready?



The Downy woodpecker and Great Blue Heron were nice enough to stay put for me near my aunts home on the Choptank River at Secretary, MD.



GALLERY



Sad Coot

By Phil Wyde



Mallard Duck

By Phil Wyde



Great Blue Heron

By Phil Wyde



Gray Fox in our backyard

by Mike Childers